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SUBJECT: MAINSTREAM MUSLIM ORGANIZATIONS STAY NEUTRAL IN
ELECTIONS, BUT ARE A PRESENCE

REF: A. JAKARTA 0189

[1](#)B. JAKARTA 0024 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Pol/C Joseph L. Novak, reasons 1.4(b+d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Indonesia's two large mainstream Muslim organizations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, have maintained their historically neutral political postures ahead of this year's national elections. Despite their proclaimed neutrality, many of their leaders and members are intensively involved in the elections. NU, for example, is maintaining its close relationship with the PKB party, although that party has splintered into factions. In the meantime, the Muhammadiyah Chair has made clear that he may run for vice president. With over 75 million members, the two groups are important forces in Indonesian society. END SUMMARY.

TECHNICALLY NEUTRAL...

[1](#)2. (SBU) Indonesia's two largest mainstream Muslim organizations are maintaining their historically neutral political postures ahead of this year's national elections. (Note: National legislative elections take place in April and presidential elections take place in July.) Neither Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) nor Muhammadiyah have explicitly endorsed any candidates (legislative or presidential) and our contacts indicate that the two groups will stick to that official policy. (Note: NU, with roughly 35 million members, advocates a spiritual version of Islam. Muhammadiyah, with over 30 million members, advocates a "modernist" version, taking a somewhat stronger posture on Middle East issues. The organizations are two of the largest religious groups in the world.)

BUT CLOSELY INVOLVED IN POLITICS

[1](#)3. (C) Despite their proclaimed neutrality, the two groups have been closely linked to political activity in the recent past. For example, NU leader Abdurrahman Wahid ("Gus Dur") served as president of Indonesia from 1999-2001. In addition, in 2004, the head of NU, Hasyim Muzadi campaigned as the vice presidential candidate of Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) candidate Megawati Sukarnoputri, losing badly in the process. The Muhammadiyah leadership has also taken a close interest in politics, lobbying for its members to receive Cabinet positions, for example. Amien Rais, a well-known Muhammadiyah leader, has also run for president. In fact, two political parties are closely linked with the organizations (although there is no formal connection): the National Awakening Party (PKB) with NU and the National Mandate Party (PAN) with Muhammadiyah. However, while NU has traditionally played a stronger political role in terms of partisan politics, Muhammadiyah has been more apolitical.

NU FACES A TRICKY CHOICE

[1](#)4. (C) In 2009, NU finds itself in a tricky position given the recent split of the PKB party. One faction remains loyal

to party founder and former president Abdurrahman Wahid while the other supports the current Party Chair Muhaimin Iskandar.

This split has left the party in a very weakened state both at the local and national levels and its poll numbers have plummeted. Due to the split, some NU members may well vote for other political parties this year. However, most NU followers will probably support one of the two factions. Chair Muzadi has not officially endorsed anyone, but in reality has thrown his weight behind Iskandar. In the meantime, it is possible that key NU leaders may serve as VP candidates. Gerindra Party leader and presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto, for example, has said his VP shortlist contains two NU leaders, Chair Muzadi and NU Women's Wing Chair Khofifah Indar Parawansa.

MUHAMMADIYAH: LEADER MAY RUN AS VP

15. (C) The Chair of Muhammadiyah, Din Syamsuddin, has also flirted with the idea of running in the upcoming election as a vice presidential candidate. He has stated that he would not rule out the possibility if approached by the right candidate. In a recent initiative, Syamsuddin attempted to form a coalition of Islamic-based parties to compete in the upcoming elections. Syamsuddin said this proposal would strengthen the cause of Islam in Indonesia. The proposal was unsuccessful, with Islamic-oriented parties indicating that they would not join any such coalition.

16. (C) PAN, which is traditionally one of the favored parties of Muhammadiyah members, remains far back in recent polls. In light of this, many Muhammadiyah members will probably be looking to support other parties. Many members of Muhammadiyah remain active in parties of all stripes. Youth Central Board Chair Muhammad Izul Muslimin recently told us that the majority of the Board's 45 members were currently active political party committee members. These include Muhammadiyah Youth Secretary General Gunawan Hidayat, who is running as a legislative candidate for the secular-oriented Golkar Party in the April elections.

AN IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN INDONESIA

17. (C) With over 75 million members, NU and Muhammadiyah are important forces in Indonesian society and no one can afford to alienate them. Politicians cater to the groups and avidly seek opportunities to address their members. Already, both groups have their schedules crammed with political-related events and this is only slated to pick up in intensity when all-out campaigning begins later this month.

18. (C) Of the two leaders and their plans, Hasyim Muzadi performed poorly as a vice presidential candidate in 2004 and it is unlikely that he will be on anyone's ticket this election, although it is possible. Din Syamsuddin--who has a strong self-perception of himself as a vital Indonesian leader--may well be on the ballot. It is questionable, however, whether he can effectively make the jump from religious group leader to political leader: Indonesians seem skeptical and he does not appear in polls as one of the more popular candidates.

HUME